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SUBJECT: Greek MFA on Jewish Cemetery Issues, Athens Mosque

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On August 28, the director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) E2 Directorate for Religious and Ecclesiastical Affairs, Amb. Christodoulos J. Lazaris, described GoG actions to address increased anti-Semitic vandalism, the current status of property restitution negotiations with the Thessaloniki Jewish community over their cemetery, and delays in the construction of Athens' first official mosque. On vandalism at the Jewish cemetery in Ioannina, Lazaris said the government had increased police patrols and planned to add security lighting to the cemetery perimeter. Lazaris said a property restitution agreement with the Thessaloniki Jewish community had been held up by a new legal advisor in the Ministry of Finance (MinFin), but that Minister of Foreign Affairs Dora Bakoyiannis and Minister of Economy and Finance Giannis Papathanasiou were discussing how to overcome this obstacle; Lazaris hoped to see progress within 30-45 days. On the Athens mosque, Lazaris noted that bureaucratic wrangling was not the only delaying factor--the government had realized that constructing a mosque would raise other delicate questions, such as which imam to choose, how to prevent conflicts between the different Muslim immigrant communities, and how to prevent the mosque from being used by religious extremists. END SUMMARY.

GoG Condemns Ioannina Jewish Cemetery Vandalisms

¶2. (SBU) Lazaris said government officials at all levels of the Greek government had unequivocally condemned the 2008 and 2009 vandalism of the Ioannina Jewish cemetery. In addition to FM Bakoyiannis' June 17 statement, during a memorial ceremony for Greek survivors of the Holocaust, that the Ioannina vandals evoked "revulsion and strong disapproval" in all Greeks, Lazaris noted that on July 10 Minister of Interior Prokopis Pavlopoulos condemned the acts in a press conference--as did prefect and city-level officials for Ioannina.

¶3. (SBU) Describing the government response, Lazaris said local police had increased patrols around the cemetery in January, after a wave of anti-Semitic incidents in Greece following Israeli military action in Gaza, but reduced them in May when no more incidents occurred. (NOTE: The cemetery was vandalized again in June.) He attributed the acts to "young punks" and said that the police were looking for suspects. Lazaris also stated that the Ministry of Public Works planned to add security lighting and clear a more secure buffer space on the cemetery's perimeter by the end of the year.

¶4. (U) The text of Pavlopoulos' July 10 statement: "The Government condemns these incidents, in no uncertain voice, expressing the indignation of Greek society as a whole. Such incidents brutally insult fundamental and time-honored values of our nation, including democracy, freedom of religion, respect for diversity and honoring the dead." (NOTE: FM Bakoyiannis' June 17 statement can be found by searching the www.mfa.gr website.)

MinFin Legal Dispute Further Delays Thessaloniki Restitution Deal

¶5. (SBU) Lazaris said that property restituQon negotiations between the Jewish community of Thessaloniki and a MinFin-appointed committee over the Thessaloniki Jewish cemetery would be delayed due to objections raised by a new MinFin legal advisor. MinFin and the MFA had made a lot of progress towards a solution as of June, Lazaris said, with the Jewish community of Thessaloniki expressing willingness to accept a cash settlement rather than a land swap. (Lazaris explained that a land swap would have been too politically sensitive in the aftermath of the Vatopedion monastery property swap scandal.) However, in August a new legal advisor at MinFin raised what seemed to be largely process-related objections to the settlement, saying that cash settlements required a different legal process from a property swap--and the MinFin committee had to start its paperwork over from scratch. Deputy FM Theodore Kassimis had "gone ballistic" at hearing this news, and FM Bakoyiannis and Minister of Finance Papathanasiou called each other twice earlier in August to work out a solution. Lazaris said he hoped for additional progress within 30-45 days.

GoG Moving More Slowly, Carefully on Athens Mosque

¶6. (SBU) Poloff asked Lazaris why construction on the Athens mosque had been delayed since 2002, given the fact that legislative approval for the buiQing already existed, an appropriate site on Ministry of Defense (MOD) Navy land had been located, and the government and Greek Orthodox Church were publicly supportive. Lazaris said one obstacle was the MOD's unwillingness to pay to relocate naval structures from the site, even though the site only had a few barracks and was used primarily to store unused machinery. Also, officials had recently realized that operating the mosque would be more complicated and politically delicate than initially thought. Each Muslim immigrant community already had its own unofficial imams with differing religious views, Lazaris said, and selecting an imam for the official mosque would be a sensitive process fraught with sectarian, theological, and legal problems. Another question was how to prevent religious extremists from infiltrating or gaining influence in the mosque. Due to these concerns, Lazaris said, the Greek government was unlikely to move quickly on starting mosque construction.

Comment: Implications of a PASOK Government

¶7. (SBU) With early national elections scheduled for October 4 and the center-left Pan-Hellenic Socialist Alliance (PASOK) party leading in the polls, some members of the Muslim community are quietly hoping for more progress on the mosque and Muslim cemetery issues under a PASOK government. Numerous representatives of Muslim community groups and immigrant associations have indicated that they see PASOK as more sympathetic to migrants' issues, and PASOK-linked Greek NGO representatives also foresee progress on Muslim outreach and integration efforts under a PASOK government. Given that the current impasse on the mosque may be an issue of bureaucracy, though, political will from the next government will be required--and Post will continue pressing GoG interlocutors on the importance of these issues.

¶8. (SBU) On the Thessaloniki Jewish cemetery settlement negotiations, prospects for a more rapid solution under a PASOK government are less clear. Though negotiations have gone slowly with the current New Democracy-led government, high-level officials in the Ministry of Finance and the MFA affirmed that the political will for a solution existed--and that a resolution was only a matter of time. With a change of government on the horizon, however, the Thessaloniki Jewish Community may have to reach out to a whole new set of principals--a possible setback in terms of political will. Post will engage key members of any new government to keep up the momentum towards a property restitution solution.
Speckhard